

# Art is the best medicine

Many artists claim to have led troubled lives, but Hackney-based painter Natascha Germane has had an exceptionally traumatic one. **Katy Barnato** talks to her about using art as therapy

LOOKING at Natascha Germane’s exhibition in the basement Hackney gallery, you would be forgiven for thinking she was the latest up-and-coming artist to be lionised by trendy Shoreditch types.

But look closer, and you’ll see that the colourful, abstract landscapes are not for sale. In fact the scenes of sunsets, night skies and water-falls are displayed purely to provide inspiration for those affected by serious mental health problems.

The 36-year-old artist works with the Psychiatric Rehabilitation Association (PRA) based at the Et Cetera gallery off Mare Street. The PRA provides a range of creative activities for members who are recovering from illnesses such as schizophrenia and severe depression.

As well as exhibiting her art, Natascha is working with these members, encouraging them to take part in weekly art classes and use art as a way to help them cope with their illnesses.

“I like to teach. You feel the change in a class and it’s a great feeling,” says Natascha.

Simon Behrman, the services co-ordinator at the PRA, says having an expert at the centre has been invaluable in encouraging the members to get involved with the project.

“Having Natascha here is an inspiration,” he says. “We really appreciate her being here helping us.”

Gary White, who suffers from psychosis, has been attending the PRA for the last 16 years. “It has improved my confidence and it keeps me stimulated,” he says. “I have come back down to earth over the last few years, and doing the art has helped.”

Natascha’s art floods throughout the building, lighting up the walls with contrasting colours and scenes. The pictures in each room are chosen carefully by their use of

colour. Soothing blues and greens are used in the counselling rooms to create a calming atmosphere for members, while more vibrant colours are used in the staff room to inspire creativity and enthusiasm.

“I like to feel that both the staff and the members are excited about my paintings,” Natascha enthuses. “It gives me the feeling that people have actually got the message and understand what I am trying to do.”

She chose to share her passion with people battling with mental health problems because she feels that art has helped her through difficult patches in her own life. “I paint in order to cope with life,” says Natascha. “I understand the state of mind where you don’t have the strength to carry on with life.”

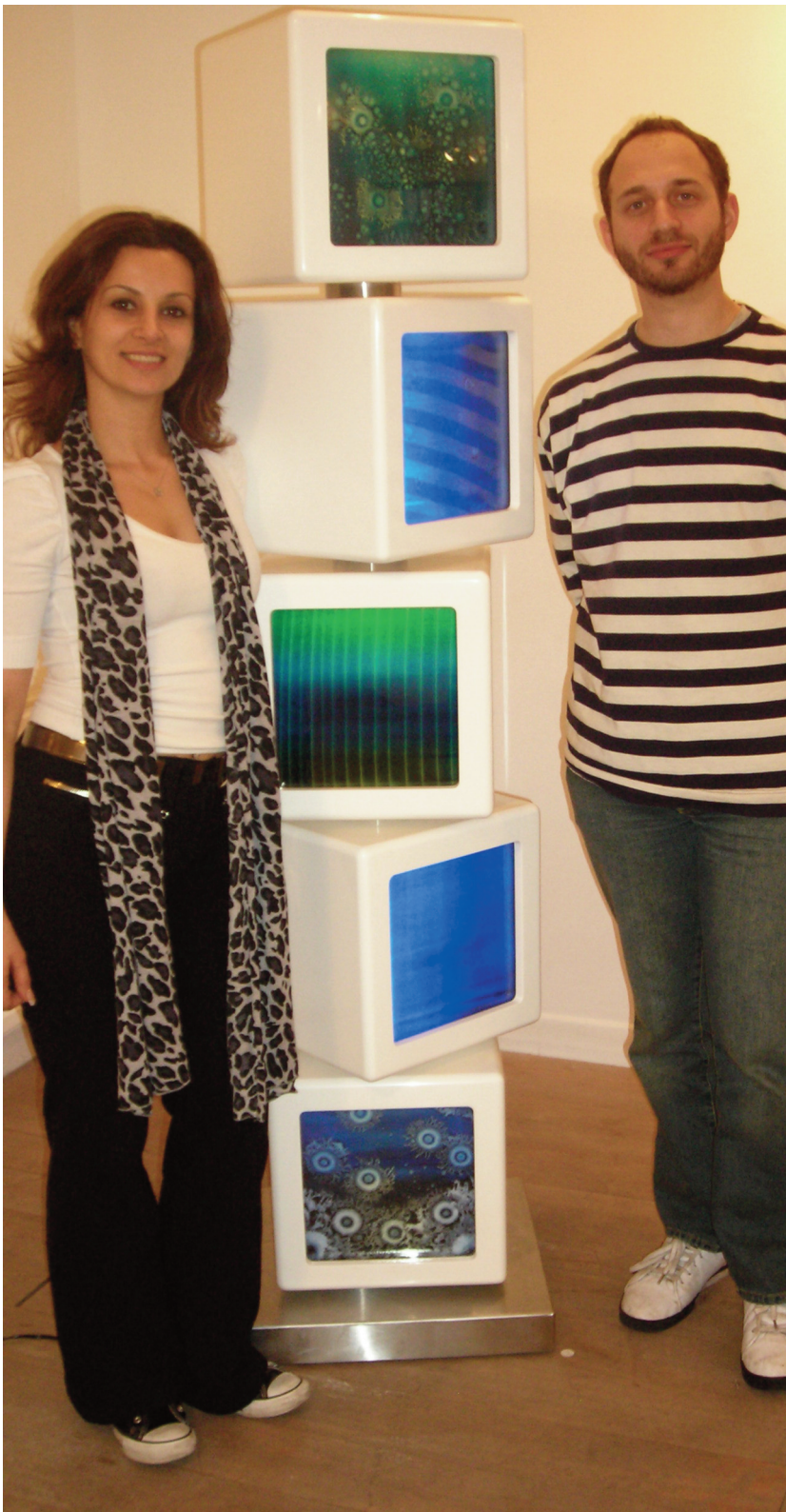
As a six-year-old child, Natascha was forced to move to Iran at the height of the Iraq-Iran war, after her parents divorced. “I saw things no little girl should see,” she says.

When Natascha returned to live in Germany four years later, she suffered racial abuse and became involved in gang violence. She also became increasingly dislocated from her family.

“I went off by myself at an early age. I worked from age 14 and left home at 16. I never took money or any support. I always tried to do everything by myself.”

The death of a close friend made Natascha re-evaluate her life. She returned to art, and entered the Hamburg Technical School to study graphic design. But her studies were cut short after a car accident left her unable to work to pay for her course fees. However, she continued to exhibit her work throughout Hamburg, and says she did not mind having to leave.

“My teacher always used to say that university is for people who don’t know what they want,” she says. “I do.”



Artist Natascha Germane with Simon Behrman, services co-ordinator at the Psychiatric Rehabilitation Association

Art at no cost: your guide to seven days of complimentary culture

Thursday

Urban music night featuring East London’s hottest hip hop artists, including The Entertainment and Hackney Boots. The Others Club, Manor Road, 7pm until late.

Friday

The Mystery Jets and The Lovely Jonjo take to the decks for this week’s Free Friday, alongside performances from electronic groups Primary 1 and Chew Lips. Cargo, Rivington Street, 8pm until 3am.

Saturday

Experience the Orient at *Day Under Cherry Blossom*. Inspired by Hanami, a Japanese celebration of the blossoming of cherry trees, the exhibition features works by British photographer Michael Hammond and Japanese painter Mayauko Matsunami. Transition Gallery, Andrews Road, 12pm until 6pm.

A night of live music and comedy hosted by an revolving line-up of cheeky compères. The Globe, Morning Lane, 8pm until late.

Sunday

Contemporary art showcase starring Adam Gillam and Sarah MacKillop, who approach the construction of objects from a conceptual angle. MOT International, Andrews Road, 12pm until 6pm.

Monday

London artists including Vanessa Benson, Debbie Booth and Simon Head exhibit their work. Pages of Hackney bookshop, Lower Clapton Road, from 10am.

Tuesday

Marvel at medical memorabilia at the reconstruction of a 1950s Hackney dental surgery. Hackney Museum, Morning Lane, 9.30am until 5.30pm.

Wednesday

Tom Booth hosts an open mic night, featuring performances by eight up-and-coming comedians. Comedy Café, Rivington Street, 7pm until 12am.